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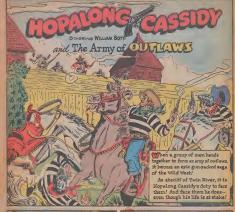
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# E CHALLENGER

A RED ROAN Wild Horse Story

By Dick Kraus

HE MOUNTAIN AIR was clear and crisp. All that could be heard was the chirping of a tiny bird in a thicket, and the faint whispering of the breeze, playing through the stunted oak on the slones.

Then there came a new sound-the drumming of a horse's hooves on the mountain-

Moving swiftly, his scarlet coat gleaming brilliantly in the sunlight, a great stallion came into view. Long mane and tail waving like crimson banners, it was easy to see how he had earned the name of Red Roan, King of the Wild Horses! It did not seem that any other wild stallion could match him for speed or for grace!

Long strides eating up the miles, Red Roan was galloping toward the Sierra Verde range, where he knew his herd

would be waiting for him.

the ground, eagerly,

A month before, the strawberry stallion's leg had been hadly injured in a hattle with a huge bear. But he had been taken home and nursed back to health by the ranchman whose life he had saved. Now, leg healed, he had been released, and was heading for his herd again.

Momentarily, the crimson bronc paused on a little hillock, great dark nostrils searching the wind. There was a faint scent in the air. His eyes flicked over the distant mountain range. Yes! There they were! The mares and colts of the wild horse herd were cropping grass on a distant

Tossing his long head, Red Roan pawed

Then, whinnying, he sped down the hillock, and galloped across the intervening plain. But as he approached the herd, he suddenly pulled back, skidding to a surprised halt. For there, standing boldly before the mares and colts, was another stallignl

This was a giant black horse, powerfully muscled, his sides and legs torn and scarred with the wounds of many a cruel fight. His pose was one of defiance. He had taken over the leadership of the herd in Red

Roan's absence, and he intended to keen it. But Red Roan had returned to lead the herd himself and, according to the way of the wild, only a test of might could settle the differences between the two stallions.

Without hesitating, Red Roan plunged forward. There was a challenger to the king of the herd, and the challenger must be beaten!

Swiftly, the midnight-black horse wheeled to meet the attack. Rearing back, he was outlined against the blue sky, and Red Roan could see that his opponent stood a good hand above him, and that he probably weighed a great deal more. too!

Straining mightily, white teeth gleaming, the two horses joined battle.

Again and again, their hooves opened ugly gashes in the other's sides and flanks. Again and again, their teeth grazed the other's head and neck, in savage, wolf-like

Unused to battle, and weakened by his month of inactivity, Red Roan slowly began to tire. He fought valiantly, but the weariness crept in a great waves through his back and legs. He could not move so quickly and the black horse was reaching him more easily with his punishing blows.

Then, the challenger suddenly lunged forward with all his might, smashing Red Roan squarely on his side.

AUGHT off balance, the scarlet horse was hurled to the ground. Immediately, a terrible pain shot through his leg! The old wound he had suffered from the bear had reopened. Somehow, he managed to struggle to his feet, avoiding the lashing, hammer-like blows of his triumphant enemy! Then, head down, he cantered away, favoring the wounded leg, limping

badly, and bleeding in several spots. When he was a half-mile away, Red

The black stallion had returned to the

herd, having repelled the old ruler. Now he was king, for he had won the battle. It was Nature's law.

Slowly, Red Roan moved away, a solitary speck on the plain.

He had been in this position when he was a young horse and had been defeated by the gray king of the herd. Then he'

had come back to become the ruler. But would his leg heal now? Could he ever defeat this mighty black horse? Dejected. Red Roan began to crop grass. MONTH WENT BY. In time, the

crimson stallion's leg had knit. And, through his constant movements on the prairie in following the travels of the herd, he had regained his old strength, Red Roan felt that it was now time to challenge his enemy again,

But he knew that it would be no easy "He is cunning and he is strong! So I,

The herd had come to a spot in the

mountains that Red Roan remembered from his colthood days. There was a great pine forest, and below it, a stream that opened out into a muskeg-covered swamp. Here Red Roan had once seen a moose, wandered down from the North Woods, hopelessly mired! With his great weight, the moose had broken through the layer of muskeg, and had become trapped in the swamp

As he remembered the moose, Red Roan suddenly brought his head high in the breeze. There was a chance-a chance he would take!

Curvetting, Red Roan turned toward the herd. His mane whipping in the breeze, he galloped up, and then halted again, just as he had a month before. Imperiously, his whinny was heard. Just as the month before, the giant black steed galloped out to meet him! All along, the black horse had watched him following the herd, wondering when he would press the fight

Now he knew and he was not worried! This time, the midnight horse decided, the fight would be to a finish. Only one For a moment, the horses reared high

on their hind legs, striking out angrily. Then, Red Roan turned, and began to trot away, down the slope.

Without pausing, the bigger horse slip-

ped into quick pursuit. Again they met in a blurred whirl of combat, and again Red Roan was the first to pull away. The black stallion followed him close to the old muskeg swamp.

Hooves making hollow, sucking sounds. Red Roan lunged into the swamp. The giant midnight bronc was close behind

The black horse reared high, his feet pounding 'a savage tattoo on Red Roan's side! But now Red Roan turned and fought back with a savage fury that would not be denied. The black steed whirled away and then came back to the fight. Together they twisted and slashed, long teeth drawing painful welts.

Then the greater weight of the black horse had a sudden, disastrous effect!

First one, then the other of his hind legs, broke through the muskeg. Desperately he struggled, trying to escape; but the harder he fought, the worse he became embroiled. And all the while he was pinioned to the treacherous swamp, Red Roan was slashing at him, biting, hitting him with mighty hooves. This was what he had planned!

Finally, the black horse sank helplessly to the ground in surrender. It was the end. He was ready to die.

But Red Roan stepped back. He was not a vengeful conqueror. He stood there, sides heaving in and out. After a while, recovering strength, the black horse managed to heave himself up from the muskeg. Thoroughly beaten, both by Red Roan's courage and cunning, he stumbled out of the swamp.

With great dark eyes, Red Roan watched him go. He knew he would not return, for in this battle the master had been proven. Slowly, the scarlet stalkion's tongue lick-

ed his wounds.

THEN his nostrils flickered, and he raised his head. There, on the hillside above the swamp, the herd was waiting for its leader. His tail whipped out in the air and his feet drummed along the ground. He had been away a long time, but Red Roan was once again ruler of the herd!

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